



## **Mad Enchantment: Claude Monet and the Painting of the Water Lilies**

*Ross King*

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Claude Monet is perhaps the world's most beloved artist, and among all his creations, the paintings of the water lilies in his garden at Giverny are most famous. Seeing them in museums around the world, viewers are transported by the power of Monet's brush into a peaceful world of harmonious nature. Monet himself intended them to provide "an asylum of peaceful meditation." Yet, as Ross King reveals in his magisterial chronicle of both artist and masterpiece, these beautiful canvases belie the intense frustration Monet experienced at the difficulties of capturing the fugitive effects of light, water, and color. They also reflect the terrible personal torments Monet suffered in the last dozen years of his life.

*Mad Enchantment* tells the full story behind the creation of the *Water Lilies*, as the horrors of World War I came ever closer to Paris and Giverny, and a new generation of younger artists, led by Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso, were challenging the achievements of Impressionism. By early 1914, French newspapers were reporting that Monet, by then 73 and one of the world's wealthiest, most celebrated painters, had retired his brushes. He had lost his beloved wife, Alice, and his eldest son, Jean. His famously acute vision--what Paul Cezanne called "the most prodigious eye in the history of painting"--was threatened by cataracts. And yet, despite ill health, self-doubt, and advancing age, Monet began painting again on a more ambitious scale than ever before. Linking great artistic achievement to the personal and historical dramas unfolding around it, Ross King presents the most intimate and revealing portrait of an iconic figure in world culture--from his lavish lifestyle and tempestuous personality to his close friendship with the fiery war leader Georges Clemenceau, who regarded the *Water Lilies* as one of the highest expressions of the human spirit.

## Mad Enchantment: Claude Monet and the Painting of the Water Lilies Details

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Author : Ross King

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## **From Reader Review Mad Enchantment: Claude Monet and the Painting of the Water Lilies for online ebook**

### **Bettie? says**

BOTW

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08492fv>

Oh blimey, this should have sent me into raptures, and it really would have, if I hadn't, lifelongingly? (heh!) acquainted myself, through pure love, to Monet.

The saddest part is that no identifiable and visible part that let the side down - it was just dead throughout, which of course, Monet, and his lilded gift, could never, ever be.

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### **Tudor Ciocarlie says**

Such a powerful story about two best friends at the end of their lives: the impressionist painter Claude Monet and the journalist and politician Georges Clemenceau. They are 70 years old at the beginning of this book and still capable of creating their masterpieces in the next decade: Monet by painting Water Lilies and Clemenceau by becoming prime minister and by decisive contributing to French victory in the First World War. This is easily one of the best books about art that I have ever read.

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### **Barbara (The Bibliophage) says**

As much as we imagine Monet and his tranquil home, Giverny, as a spot secluded in place and time, it wasn't. Monet was subject to the forces around him, while working on some of his most famous art, the Water Lilies series.

Mad Enchantment is a deeply researched, well-written biography of Claude Monet. It starts in the Belle Époque, a time of peace just before World War I. Author Ross King introduces us to Monet, as well as his family and companions. We learn about his benefactors, his friends, and his critics.

King includes charming personal details about the artist, "Monet loved birds and animals, even leaving the windows of his dining room open so the sparrows could help themselves to bread crumbs from the table."

We learn about the property in Giverny, as well as how the gardens inspired Monet's art as he entered his 70s.

As a former marketing professional, I was surprised to learn about Money's astute branding. Says King, "Monet's use of this new term, "Grande Décoration," which he pointedly capitalized, was intended to pique the interest of Koechlin, a respected art historian and administrator whose specialty happened to be the

decorative arts."

All that said, I just didn't find the book riveting enough to read past the 30% mark. The writing is fairly dry, and focuses on the historical context of Monet's life rather than on the man himself.

Thanks to NetGalley and Bloomsbury USA for an advance copy in exchange for an honest review.

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### **Krista says**

*As far back as 1891, Octave Mirbeau wrote that Monet did not “limit himself to translating nature” and that his paintings revealed “the states of unconsciousness of the planet, and the suprasensible forms of our thoughts.” A year later, Camille Mauclair enthused that Monet’s paintings were “made from a dream and a magical breath...leaving for the eyes only a mad enchantment that convulses vision, reveals an unsuspected nature, lifts it up unto the symbol by way of this unreal and vertiginous execution.” Monet, he claimed, skimmed over “the philosophy of appearances” in order to show “eternal nature in all her fleeting aspects”.*

As an eighteen-year-old backpacking around Europe, I distinctly remember being overwhelmed as I experienced Monet's *Water Lilies* installation (although before I read this book, I would have sworn this room was an annex attached directly to the Louvre, not a separate museum; yet I can find no evidence to support my false memory), and what overwhelmed me was the fact that I didn't really understand what I was seeing; having had no prior exposure to Impressionism, I found the huge murals to be unsettling and uncanny; *wrong* somehow, but undeniably genius. It would seem that my own ambivalent reaction was predicated by that of the official French art community (at a time when art was considered a public endeavor and tastes were determined and reinforced by “experts”), and throughout his life and to this day, Claude Monet went in and out of fashion, but always pursued his own point of view. In *Mad Enchantment*, art historian Ross King examines Monet's career – particularly focussing on the last couple of decades of his life in which he created the *Water Lilies* – and while the historical perspective and biographical details were illuminating, this book was just all right; a little dull, a little repetitive, the parts about Monet himself being not the most interesting.

*Much of Claude Monet’s life and work had been a mad striving for the impossible. His goal, which he frankly admitted was unattainable, was to paint his carefully chosen object – the cathedral, cliff, or wheat stack before which he raised his easel – under singular and fleeting*

*conditions of weather and light. As he told an English visitor, he wanted “to render my impressions before the most fugitive effects.” In 1889 a critic had scoffed that Monet’s paintings were nothing more than a matter of “geography and the calendar.” This was, however, to miss the point of Monet’s work. Since objects changed their color and appearance according to the seasons, the meteorological conditions, and the time of day, Monet hoped to capture their visual impact in these brief, distinctive, ever-changing moments in time. He concentrated not only on the objects themselves but also, critically, on the atmosphere that surrounded them, the erratically shifting phantoms of light and color that he called the enveloppe. “Everything changes, even stone,” he wrote to Alice while working on his paintings of the façade of Rouen Cathedral. But freezing the appearance of objects amid fleeting phantoms of light and air was no easy task. “I am chasing a dream,” he admitted in 1895. “I want the impossible.”*

In 1883, after having suffered the loss of both his wife and one of his sons, Monet moved to the village of Giverny with his mistress, her six children, and his surviving child. He was, by this time, perhaps France's most famous and respected painter – Impressionism having finally gained respectability – and with his great wealth, Monet was soon able to not only buy the largest home in the village, but the adjoining properties in order to expand his gardens. He was able to flood one swampy adjoining lot by diverting the local river (*tant pis* for the locals and their thirsty cattle) and here create a beautiful lily pond, stocked with the latest dazzling hybrids introduced by the Horticultural Society. Monet was a gourmand and a generous host, always insisting on a hearty wine-soaked lunch for visitors, and a postprandial stroll often involved taking guests through a tunnel beneath the nearby road and emerging on the banks of his Edenic pond (I loved the notion that, although this property was ringed with a stone wall for privacy, Monet had left an opening for curious eyes). Standing on the Japanese bridge and staring down at his prized lilies, and deeper, at their swaying roots, Monet became obsessed with the idea of capturing the totality of everything he was seeing: light and water and atmosphere and matter. Although he did sometimes turn to other subjects, most of the painting Monet did for the rest of his life occurred at the edge of this pond.

*Mad Enchantment* really takes off when WWI breaks out, and as the battle is fought within twenty miles of his village home (and as four close family members, including his own son, are sent to the front), Monet's art takes on the label of “war effort”. Despite the privations felt by the entire country as the war drags on and on, Monet is able to requisition coal and petrol and cigarettes as a matter of national priority, and it is during these years that he conceives of the *Grande Décoration* – the massively scaled water lily murals that would undoubtedly require a dedicated space for their display – and he attacked the project with his customary obsessiveness and brutishness: heaping abuse on the beloved stepdaughter who acted as his assistant, destroying canvases by the dozen with knife and bonfire when piqued by fury. I liked the incidental information about how the Great War was impacting French art in general; and especially that it took serving cubists to conceive of (and create) the first camouflage; and that eventually the cubists went out of favour as too “Germanic” a style (which led to the resurgence of Impressionism as the true French art language). And doesn't this all sound so interesting?

The problem I have with *Mad Enchantment* is that all the best parts are told from the perspective of Monet's old friend Georges Clemenceau – the politician and wartime prime minister whose nickname was “The Tiger” (eventually to be known as “Father Victory”) – and while his letters are famously witty and perceptive, and often the voice of encouragement and reason that continually prompts Monet to pick up his paintbrush again, by comparison, Monet seems a bit dull and spoiled. One man is described driving to the front to rally the troops, negotiating the Treaty of Versailles, travelling the world to ensure support for the reconstruction of France, and the other man stands in his garden painting flowers: I 100% support the notion

of art as an important civic endeavor, and without the wartime stories there would be a definite lack of perspective for what Monet was trying to express in his work, but if you cut out everything from this book about and written by Clemenceau, there wouldn't be any book left. (And note: if this book had been called *The Tiger and the Hedgehog* and marketed as the story of this remarkable friendship, I wouldn't have this issue.)

I also found the prose to be plodding and repetitive: ie, At one point King includes a story about Monet being so focussed on his painting that a barber would need to visit the gardens to trim his hair as he worked. And then near the end of the book, King notes that a writer was granted access to compose a biography of the great painter late in his life, and it was here that Monet first shared the story of summoning the barber. I wasn't trying to collect examples of things that annoyed me in this book, but this kind of repetition (stating something once as "something that was known to happen", and then again as "this is when it happened") jarred me a few times. There was also a feeling of the book being padded with too much extraneous information – and I totally understand why an author who did such extensive research would have a hard time not putting in everything he found interesting – but for example: there are a couple of pages on the symbolism of water lilies in classical myth (and especially how they represent "the lost female"; pertinent to an artist, one supposes, who outlived both of his wives), and at the end of this exposition, King concludes that while this is provocative, Monet himself never mentioned being interested in such symbolism.

*It is difficult to separate discussions of an artist's "late work" from romantic associations of blind seers offering up unutterable visions from beyond the threshold, or of old men raging against the dying of the light. But it is undeniable that as his eye filmed over and his vision slowly dimmed, Monet, "who caught and sang the sun in flight", focused ever more intently on the fleeting rays of light that he had always chased and cherished.*

As Monet outlived his fellow Impressionists – his friends Rodin and Renoir, Manet and Cezanne – there was a growing urgency to complete his great final work, and a cruel irony to the cataracts that caused him to go nearly blind. The story of Monet's life becomes more pitiable as he arranges to donate the *Water Lilies* to a postwar France that is harkening back to the stability of classical forms; several smaller water lily paintings go unsold in Paris galleries. Although in the end Monet couldn't bring himself to let go of the murals during his lifetime, the Orangerie des Tuileries was modified to his specifications and the murals installed as per his vision. And the public stayed away in droves; the gallery eventually being used for other exhibitions (at one point a display of tapestries was draped over Monet's work) and even dog shows. It took American Abstract artists after WWII to "rediscover" the Orangerie and Monet.

Obviously, I learned a lot about Monet in *Mad Enchantment*, and I loved both the integrated photographs (of people and places) and the colour plates in the middle (that depict various paintings), and the historical perspective certainly sheds a new light of my own unsettling experience with the *Water Lilies* (it would seem that they are intended to be overwhelming, the splashes of colour evoking the impermanence of life, the series of willows bearing down with the burden of wartorn grief); so this wasn't a waste of time by any means. Just not quite my cuppa in execution.

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### **Jim Razinha says**

I once had the opportunity to purchase an original Monet, and by "opportunity", I mean 20 some years ago my wife and I went into a gallery that had one for \$14,000. An amount we did not have back then.

I got an advance look at this from NetGalley. This had the potential to be quite dry, but Mr. King did a very good job with the narrative. Incredibly researched and sourced, the later/last years of Monet and his challenges/triumphs with his lilies are laid out in beautiful detail. I have no reference frame to compare, as I've never read a bio of Monet, so I'll simply acknowledge that this appears quite thorough and unvarnished. I especially appreciated King's presentation of events for which he had no confirmation: "Clemenceau would have been conducted to a room he knew well, ..." Unlike hacks like Bill O'Reilly and his semi-ghost who state conjecture as fact, King does no such thing. And speaking of Clemenceau, the Tiger plays a prominent role in this biography - as one would expect if one knew his friendship with Monet.

I like Monet well enough, and though I have have a much deeper exposure to the art world in recent years, I admit I still have a hard time understanding

"Monet paints in a strange language", [a] reviewer had claimed in 1883, "whose secrets, together with a few initiates, he alone possesses."

Or, on Monet changing landmarks:

Faithfully depicting architectural features was less important to him than creating a striking composition."

I have an extremely hard time buying interpretations and inferences unless they are from the conformed words of the actual artist, but King has a plethora of references of the master's own words with respect to his feelings on color and composition and the subject at hand. (Color was a *huge* source of frustrations in Monet's cataract struggles.)

Bottom line, this is a fascinating story of perhaps the greatest Impressionist artist.

A couple of notes on the book: the review text had no index, or list of illustrations. Nor did it have any photos of the subject (lilies) - I don't know if permissions had not yet been obtained or there is no intent to include them. The photos in the galley (I use that term given the source - NetGalley) were gray-scale. For a book on Monet's water lilies, color would seem to be essential.

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## **Laura says**

*From BBC Radio 4 - Book of the Week:*

*The story of Claude Monet's later years and the famous paintings he produced at home in Giverny, abridged in five parts by Katrin Williams:*

*In the 1890's the painter and his large family move to the famous town, and over the years the gardens at his house become lush, exotic*

*and famous for pictures of water lilies and weeping willows - part of 'le grand decoration'. But how did it all start?*

*Reader Allan Corduner*

*Producer Duncan Minshull.*

### **Carlos says**

this was a book regarding a topic that while I'm very interested in i haven't read so much about it in ever. That being said I have always enjoyed Monet's work specially "water lillies" . This book is not about art or the techniques used by Monet ..rather its about the artist himself and his last years of artistic work...that happens to correlate to his greatest most prolific years of artistic output..In this book you get a glimpse of the artistic scene in France at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, you also see how French art was affected by the onset of WWI .....and you learn that although artist can be difficult , we must learn not to pass judgement on the artist but rather in their work....Monet may had had a complex personality towards his old age and that might have complicated his relationships with friends, patrons and the artistic scene but we must also recognize that it was then that he created his greatest works....Read this book if you are an art lover or a Monet aficionado .

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### **Yodamom says**

4.5This book has much more story than Monet. It centers around him, his work, his family his struggles, but it cover so much more. The first world war is prominent from the early whispers of war to the horrible realities of it. Monet, his famous artist friends, journalists, politicians and the community around him he so loved withered, many died. I learned many interesting details about the war in France from a new perspective, it was fascinating and heartbreaking.

Monet was a off centered man. His quirks had quirks when it came to his paintings and his garden. Luckily for the world his quirks fed his genius. This man was an introvert, loyal to his few friends and family. Volatile and moody he destroyed hundreds of paintings in his outrages. Time held him and the changes drove his paintings. There would be dozens of easels set up along his garden capturing the differences, at seven minute intervals. The need to catch each shadow, change of color, wind direction and seasonal changes.

I learned so much from this story. i learned about the lives of people in France during WW1 the changes, hardships, and suffering as well as the hope and fight for happiness. It is not a book I could read quickly I read it in small bits then found myself thinking about the moments I discovered.

I had no interest in Monet before this. I purchased a puzzle of his water lily painting then say then saw this book offered and thought, why not ? I finished my very difficult puzzle with the help of my adult children while sharing stories about the book with them. History as it should be written, interesting with personal stories is so interesting.

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### **Wanda says**

2 DEC 2016 - a recommendation through Bettie. Thank you. Such beautiful paintings!

10 DEC 2016 -

Episode 1 of 5 - Mad Enchantment - The story of Claude Monet's later years and the famous paintings he produced at home in Giverny, abridged in five parts by Katrin Williams: In the 1890's the painter and his

large family move to the famous town, and over the years the gardens at his house become lush, exotic and famous for pictures of water lilies and weeping willows - part of 'le grand decoration'. But how did it all start? Reader Allan Corduner. Producer Duncan Minshull.

Listen here - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0849...>

Episode 2 of 5 - World War I rages and has taken away many of the workers from his gardens. But the painter receives his friends and visitors and doggedly gets on with his 'grande decoration.'

Listen here - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b084bgrn>

Episode 3 of 5 - To accommodate the enormous canvases he's working on, the painter must get approval to extend his studios. The new space will become the size of an aircraft hangar, as 'la grande decoration' proceeds. Listen here - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b084bn5q>

Episode 4 of 5 - The painter is under pressure from his friend George Clemenceau to donate some canvases to the state. At the same time he meets one of the world's wealthiest collectors, Kojiro Matsukata from Tokyo. Listen here - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b084d7b2>

Episode 5 of 5 - His cataracts are worsening, which leads to a disintegration of solid forms, but an intensity of vision. Should he visit a doctor in Paris? And what about his donation of paintings to the Orangerie after his death? Listen here - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b084dkqc>

I would have liked to have known Mr Monet.

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### Chrissie says

May I first suggest that you carefully read the book description at Good Reads? It is accurate.

What made the book click for me? The emotional strain of Monet's last twelve years felt palpable as I read this book. I completely empathized with his emotional turmoil. His loss of vision coupled with his own high expectations must have been excruciatingly difficult to bear. That he became irascible and impossible to deal with feels completely understandable. The author makes the last years of Monet's life feel intimate and very real. I came to understand Monet at the end of his life, and that is when you draw up for yourself what is important. Monet's personality becomes tangible.

The long friendship between Claude Monet (1840 – 1926) and Georges Clémenceau (1841 – 1929) is realistically and movingly drawn. Clémenceau was the Prime Minister of France during the last year of the First World War and until January 20, 1920, with President Raymond Poincaré. He served an earlier term as prime minister but this is not covered in the book. The book covers the years 1914- 1926, the last twelve years of Monet's life. Clémenceau died three years later. Historical details, both about artists of the period

and the war as well as the subsequent difficulties surrounding the Treaty of Versailles are covered. History is an essential part of the events because it shaped the life of Clémenceau and thus his relationship with Monet. Don't read this book if history bores you. For me, Clémenceau is no longer merely a figurehead, but someone I know. Monet is no longer merely an artist in a book, but a person whom I have better come to understand.

Before reading this book, I knew that Monet's *Lilies* were housed in the Parisian *Musée de l'Orangerie*, where I saw them. This book focuses on how the paintings came to be and how they came to be placed there. This is a fascinating story with many twists and turns. Kojiro Matsukata, the first president Kawasaki Dockyards, sought to purchase them for the *Sheer Pleasure Fine Arts Museum* in Japan!

The book is well researched, detailed and thorough. Both faults and strengths are pointed out. Many quotes are given. The quotes put meat on the bones of those we encounter.

Anyone picking up this book will probably already know if they love impressionist art or not, and if so why. If you do, it is always fun to hear how others describe it. It is always fun to know a little bit more about the artists who were at its source, who gave it acclaim and who despised it.

If you have not been to Monet's house and garden in Giverny, France, just outside Paris, put it high up on your list of places that must be seen. Today it is a museum. In 1883 it was where Monet went with his two children, Michel and Jean, after his first wife Camille died. In 1892 he married Alice Hoschedé, after her own estranged husband died. Her six children became as his own. One hears much about the stepdaughter, Blanche Hoschedé. She is 48 years old in 1914 as the events in this memoir unfold. She was the one child to have an artistic bent, and she was devoted to her stepfather. Clémenceau called her '*The Blue Angel*'. Enough! Read the book if you want to know more.

This book is filled with French names, places and expressions. Most are translated. The narrator of this audiobook, Joel Richards, does not know French. While the English lines are simple to follow, it is totally wrong to pick someone not competent in French to read this book. This explains why I have given the narration one star.

If you are interested in other books by Ross King, check out *The Judgment of Paris: The Revolutionary Decade That Gave the World Impressionism*. I gave it three stars.

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### **Christine Zibas says**

"Monet's paintings captured nature's mix of the ephemeral and the eternal, its magnitude and its minutiae, its glittering appearance and its dizzyingly fathomless depths."

It's easy to love Monet's paintings, and this book even lays out theories that his style thrust upon its viewers a "soothing effect on both the eye and brain, [with] Monet himself as *le peintre du bonheur* (the painter of happiness)."

Yet, it was not always the case with his critics, and near the book's end, Author Ross King details that it was the Abstract Expressionists, painters such as Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, many years later who reinvigorated a love for Monet. Stunning now to think that Monet and the Impressionists might have been

lost to history.

This book covers a very specific time period in Claude Monet's life. It's not a biography of his whole life, but instead covers the body of work (the water lily paintings of Giverney) that was his magnum opus. This time frame covered World War I, and with Georges Clemenceau one of Monet's greatest champions, readers are taken well into the Great War's effect on France, as well as Monet's continuing work.

This is a delightful book, as engaging as fiction, with wonderful photographs of the characters and scenery that populated Monet's life in his last years, as well as some heart-wrenching ones, of Verdun, for example, that encapsulate the horrors of the war. The book helps readers understand the very personal toll that painting took on Monet, and the challenges he faced as he worked (his perfectionism in creating the water lily series, his failing health, the loss of friends, and so on).

Ultimately, however, this is a book filled with joy and understanding. It reaches deep into the painter's life and work and allows his admirers to expand their appreciation of Monet's art, as well as for those who surrounded Monet and never let the artist succumb to his own feelings of inadequacy when it came to creating some of the most beautiful art for the ages.

Thanks to Bloomsbury Books and Good Reads for this ARC.

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### **linhtalinhtinh says**

Just as the title suggests, *Mad Enchantment* is about Claude Monet's passion for water lilies and his increasingly difficult personality towards the end of his life as his health deteriorated and his mind likewise suffered depression as he believed he could no longer see colors and thus, could no longer paint. Ross King's writing is as excellent as usual. I want to stress that his books are not formal analysis of paintings, but stories of artists and their creations, so someone curious in learning about Impressionism might have to look elsewhere. This is rather the place for the fans or 'almost' fans of Monet, learning about his life.

I think 'mad' is a little bit exaggerating. Monet appears to me such a lovely, sensitive giant. He was rich, successful, had great influences and friendships with important people. He was perhaps as powerful as an artist could be, commanding such exorbitant prices for his works. He was also a hermit, not talkative, hardworking and passionate. But even the most powerful figure can feel insecure at times. Monet could be anxious, edgy, jumpy. He questioned his own ability, plunged into depression easily each time he was in the midst of deep creation. Mild depressions proved to be quite productive, but of course severe depressions could backfire.

All of those characters, I think, are natural. Not to mention this 'mad' period is when Monet was in his late 70s early 80s. Elder people could be difficult to deal with, as we all know. They require much attention and babysitting. Monet was lucky to have two people caring a lot for him: his close friend and powerful politician Clemenceau and his step-daughter, also daughter in law, Blanche Hoschede-Monet.

I feel a great pity that most records can be recovered here are in letters, and of course letters are sent and received between friends living in some distance. As a result, the observation that we can collect about the artist is mostly from his correspondences with Clemenceau and other friends. The closest person to him, Blanche, was only mentioned on side note. She was certainly loved and appreciated for all her work and

devotion, yet the direct interaction between her and Monet isn't known, and it seems that she doesn't write any memoir about her step father. And Blanche is an artist herself.

But coming back to Monet, I think he has such an endearing characters. Not for a single moment, well maybe except one (the big one in 1924), that I lost temper with him. In photographs and in interactions with most people, he appeared more lively and confident though quiet, but, as revealed in his letters with Clemenceau, he was shy and unsure, despite his fame and power he had. And I don't think that he was just fishing for compliments, since at times he did destroy many of his canvases, feeling they weren't good enough. He was asking a lot from himself, asking a lot as experience grew, vision enlarged and ambition burnt yet body slowly failed. And he was sensitive, worried about others' opinions, not the kind and always complimenting Clemenceau, but the general public, the future perception of his body of work, especially the work in the last few years of his life. The depression is natural. And in fact it was rightly placed. His magnificent collection in Orangerie was quite neglected for a few decades, until 1960s when there was a revived interest in Monet from Abstract Expressionists, and only truly properly cared for in the 90s and 00s.

No this is a man who was at times difficult but not unkind. Reading his letters are completely different from reading Vincent van Gogh's, mind you. (If interested in Vincent, please ignore the dramatized and novelized Irving Stone's *Lust for Life* but more serious work, such as *Van Gogh: The Life* or at least read directly his letters *The Letters of Vincent van Gogh*, you will find such an annoying and disturbing personality who loved to torture his ever patient brother Theo). Monet, on the other hand, is lovely. The letters among this period are disproportionately full of anxiety and of whining, as he suffered loss of his wife, some of his friends, and also his health. But here are the letters shared with his closest friend, not that he was always just whining and did nothing. In fact he worked hard, produced so many canvases despite everything. He cared about others and worked to reconcile with Clemenceau. What I can see is someone who yearns for more, not money, oh well maybe a little bit more of recognition, but most for better vision, for more work, more art. He is in love with painting and with his garden, and someone with true passion always moves me. I cried in my heart a little bit as I saw his death, the moment when he couldn't see anymore.

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### **Jeffrey Keeten says**

**"It is difficult to separate discussions of an artist's 'late work' from romantic associations of blind seers offering up unutterable visions from beyond the threshold, or of old men raging against the dying of the light. But it is undeniable that as his eye dimmed over and his vision slowly dimmed, Monet, 'who caught and sang the sun in flight,' focused ever more intently on the fleeting rays of light that he had always chased and cherished."**

### ***Impression, Sunrise* by Claude Monet**

Claude Monet, along with the artists Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Alfred Sisley, and Frédéric Bazille, started a new movement of painting that eventually was known as Impressionism. The name was taken from Monet's painting *Impression, Sunrise* and was meant as a derogatory term. Three other artists joined their band of independent artists: Camille Pissarro, Paul Cézanne, and Armand Guillaumin. They wanted to paint in the outdoors and take advantage of the spontaneity and vibrant colors of nature. They, in particular Monet, wanted to show paintings that went beyond just what the eye could readily see. Monet had very acute vision. *"He sees differently from the rest of humanity, 'speculating that he was acutely sensitive to colors at the ultra-violent end of the spectrum."*

Later in life, that spectacular vision of his was shrouded with cataracts. He had several painful surgeries that restored some of his vision, but his sight never fully recovered. Regardless, he continued to paint until the darkness that only death can bring snuffed the last light out of those remarkable eyes. Those eyes that could see and share so much that we cannot see.

### **I'm convinced he was a genius.**

It wasn't just his remarkable eyesight, but also the tantrums he threw when he couldn't quite master on canvas what he saw in his eye. Every time he started a new painting, he attempted to make not a painting that was a perceived masterpiece to other people, but a masterpiece that captured the details exactly as he saw them. He would use up to twelve layers of paint in an attempt to recreate the perfect ripple or glimmer or splash of color. When displeased, he would slash canvases and kick holes in them with his feet. Geniuses throw the best fits just read about the epic outbursts of Mozart or Beethoven or Steve Jobs.

### **Monet was angry at himself, at his human limitations.**

His best friend, the warrior French politician Georges Clemenceau, if he were around during one of these explosions, would brave the wrath of the painter and grab paintings out of the reach of the vengeful artist. At times, Monet did feel like he was at war with his canvases. I refer to Clemenceau as a warrior because he fought twenty-two duels and survived them all. He also took on the bureaucracy of the French government and managed to tame them and focus them long enough to win WW1 by the sheer force of his will.

### **Monet in his garden.**

Clemenceau and Monet were an odd match for friendship if one only looks at the surface details of who they are, but they were both accomplished in their fields. At times, they were the very best in their fields, and that level of achievement sometimes makes it difficult to find people one can consider an equal, a confidant who could truly understand the frustrations of being perfectionists.

Monet did for water lilies what Vincent Van Gogh did for sunflowers. His gardens in Giverny were a marvel, nestled into a town that was famous for its fairytale beauty. He built a house festooned with bright, bold colors. It was always hard to pry him away from his home, his studio. How wonderful that he found the place he most wanted to be, and it took a great temptation to get him even to go to Paris for an exhibition of his work.

### **Monet's dining room at Giverny. The vibrant yellow became known as Monet Yellow.**

There are always strange nuances that I discover when I read a biography of any person. Monet may have never been the Monet who paints water lilies if his second wife Alice had not put her foot down about female models. It was either the models or her. Monet decided it was easier to work on landscapes and leave the nude models to his fellow artists. What some critics will say is that ghost feminine shapes in the leaves can be spied in most of his paintings. Are they seeing what they want to see or was Monet craftly adding the beauty of women in the swirls of his paint? Paintings can be interpreted in a number of ways, the same way stories can change meaning depending upon who reads them.

I've read several Ross King books and will read many more. He fills gaps in my knowledge and makes the subject of his book, Brunelleschi's Dome or Machiavelli or Michelangelo or Leonardo da Vinci, come alive,

whether the subject be made of stone, paint, or flesh. Highly Recommended!

I elected to buy the British edition of this book because the book itself is a work of art. They printed one of Monet's waterlily paintings on the canvas boards, and instead of a dust wrapper, they chose to put an elegant belly band around the book. The band allows more of the beautiful boards to show. It is nice to see a publisher putting the extra effort into improving the reading experience.

If you wish to see more of my most recent book and movie reviews, visit <http://www.jeffreykeeten.com>  
I also have a Facebook blogger page at: <https://www.facebook.com/JeffreyKeeten>

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### **Literary Chic says**

I once heard that if you knock a book off the shelf, you must read it. At my last library visit, I knocked *Mad Enchantment* off the new non fiction shelf. Between my superstition and the very interesting cover (only half a book jacket) I gave it a chance. It turned out to be a very serendipitous choice as the book is amazing.

Monet's story of the Water Lilies is a fascinating one. It was one of his last works and was done during World War I. With as great of a history as it was, my absolute favorite part was Clemenceau. The friendship between Monet and the French politician is beautiful! Ross King's description of Georges Clemenceau has left me so intrigued. I'm already looking for a biography on the man. I hope to find him as amazing as Ross depicted him.

Definitely a five star read!

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### **Julie says**

Proof positive that you don't have to be a nice person to be a great artist.

*Oh, those temperamental artists!* shouts the inner voice. In this case, Ross King renders a laudable biography of a slice of Monet's life, overflowing with the jagged edge of the artist's darker side. King convinces me, whether intentionally so or not, that I would not have liked Monet the Man: a self-indulgent, petulant, fractious old crank who swanned around like some troll-like prima donna. The flip side is, I would have loved Monet the Artist: I would have gladly spent all my waking hours gazing at the man at work and absorbing, with all my senses, his "mad enchantment".

I loved this book -- and hated it -- all at once.

I was disappointed to the extreme by the poor quality of the paper and the photographs/plates. To an artist, the senses are paramount: the importance of tactility, of optics, is everything. This book is as appealing as a canvas sack filled with last year's potatoes.

On visuals alone, I struggled with myself to even pick it up -- and in the end I opted to get it through the library rather than pay \$39.95 Canadian for it, which is something I would have gladly done had it been of

better quality. I'm surprised that the publishers chose such a cheap and tawdry venue for an important biography of an artist. Weren't they paying attention in Art 101?

For that alone, it barely scratches to a 3. It would have been a 5 otherwise.

Note to publishers: Don't disappoint temperamental artists -- they're so unpredictable!

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